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Subject: Anger Rises as EPA increases estimate of toxic water spill at Colorado mine

Anger Rises as E.P.A. Increases Estimate of Toxic Water Spill at Colorado Mine

By JULIE TURKEWITZ AUG. 10, 2015

Inside

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The Animas River receding to reveal a layer of sludge, just north of Durango, Colo., last week.
Credit Jerry McBride/The Durango Herald, via Associated Press

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DURANGO, Colo. — Anger over a spill of toxic water from a mine that turned this community's river into a yellow-orange ribbon rose on Sunday when the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) announced that the spill was three times larger than previously stated — and that the agency was still unsure if the polluted water posed a health threat to humans or animals.

The agency, typically charged with responding to toxic disasters, has claimed responsibility for the spill, which unleashed a chemical brew that caused levels of arsenic, lead and other metals to spike in the Animas River, a tributary that plays a vital role in the culture and economy in this patch of southwestern Colorado.

Agency officials said on Sunday that the size of the spill was larger than originally estimated: more than three million gallons rather than one million.

La Plata County and the City of Durango have declared states of emergency, and the county estimates that about 1,000 residential water wells could be contaminated. The river is closed indefinitely, and the La Plata sheriff has hastily recast his campaign signs into posters warning river visitors to stay out of the water.

The yellow plume has traveled down to New Mexico, where it is being tracked, but it is starting to dissipate, officials said.

On Sunday night, residents packed a school auditorium in Durango for a meeting with the agency's regional director, Shaun McGrath. During a public comment session that lasted more than two hours, residents flouted a sign on the wall that instructed the auditorium's typical patrons — middle schoolers — to refrain from calling out, jumping up or insulting others during assemblies.

Shouts rang out. A few people cried. One resident questioned whether the agency had refashioned itself into the "Environmental Pollution Agency." Others demanded to know what

would happen to wildlife, livestock, water wells, sediment and river-based jobs.

“When — when can we be open again?” said David Moler, 35, the owner of a river-rafting company who had approached a microphone. “All I hear is a handful of ‘gonna-dos,’ ” he added. “What should I tell my employees?”

Mr. McGrath and his colleagues urged patience and assured residents that they would provide information about health risks once they had it. The agency, he said, is awaiting test results to determine whether the water poses a risk.

“We’re going to continue to work until this is cleaned up,” Mr. McGrath said, “and hold ourselves to the same standards that we would anyone that would have created this situation.”

On Aug. 5, a team from the Environmental Protection Agency was investigating an abandoned mine about 50 miles north of here. Called the Gold King, it was last active in the 1920s, but it had been leaking toxic water at a rate of 50 to 250 gallons a minute for years. It is owned by a group called the San Juan Corporation.

A call to the company’s lawyer was not returned.

The agency had planned to find the source of the leak in the hope of one day stanching it. Instead, as workers used machinery to hack at loose material, a surprise deluge of orange water ripped through, spilling into Cement Creek and flowing into the Animas. The burst did not injure workers.

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The next day, as the neon water slid into Durango, masses of community members watched from the riverbanks. Some called it a painful procession: The Animas River is considered the cultural soul of this region, a sort of moving Main Street that hosts multiple floating parades a year and is typically bustling with rafters and kayakers.

Children study the river. Sweethearts marry on its banks. Its former name, given by Spaniards, is Río de las Ánimas, coincidentally, “River of Souls.”

On Sunday, State Senator Ellen Roberts, a Republican who lives near the river, cried softly as she considered the pollution, adding that she had dropped her father’s ashes in its depths.

“It is not just a scenic destination,” Ms. Roberts said. “It is where people literally raise their children. It is where the farmers and ranchers feed their livestock, which in turn feeds the people.

We're isolated from Denver through the mountains. And we are pretty resourceful people. But if you take away our water supply, we're left with virtually no way to move forward."

There are about 200 abandoned mines in the Animas watershed, the last of which closed in the early 1990s. Colorado has about 23,000 abandoned mines; the United States has an estimated 500,000. Since the 1870s, metal mining has both enriched and poisoned this region, turning the earth under portions of southwest Colorado into a maze of tunnels and leaving behind shuttered sites oozing with chemicals.

The Animas region is distinct in that it has an organization called the Animas River Stakeholders Group, a loose coalition of mining companies; environmental groups; property owners; and local, state and federal government entities that have worked together since 1994 to clean up some of these sites.

In recent years, the group had identified the Gold King as one of the two most polluted mine sites, and some have pushed to figure out the sources of its chemical bleed, believing that a cleanup was necessary. The Environmental Protection Agency was moving ahead with that project — without its partners — when the spill occurred.

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"Out of the long list of nature's gifts to man, none is perhaps so utterly essential to human life as soil."
Hugh Hammond Bennett